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SUBJECT: JAPAN COMMUNIST PARTY PARADOX: MORE INFLUENTIAL AS
IT WEAKENS?

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

Summary and Comment

1. (C) The Japan Communist Party is in decline. One of the largest non-ruling communist parties in the world, the JCP is faced with an aging membership and shrinking revenue as subscriptions to its newspaper and main revenue source, Akahata Shimbun ("Red Flag Newspaper") drop. Most recently, the JCP's failure to win enough votes in Diet elections to qualify for return of election deposits has hit its pocketbook particularly hard. Lacking cash and facing declining support, the party has decided to field Diet candidates only in districts where it has received eight percent or more of the vote, abandoning its previous strategy of having JCP candidates in every Diet constituency.

2. (C) Paradoxically, the weakened and reduced Communists may have more influence and, in effect, become more powerful. The key to expanded influence will be if the JCP is able to deliver their organized blocs of supporters, totaling close to 4.5 million votes in 2005, to opposition candidates in the 150 districts that will be without JCP candidates in the next Diet election. Some LDP contacts express worry the JCP will do for the DPJ what the Komeito does for the LDP, but other observers say relations between the JCP and the opposition DPJ in the countryside are antagonistic and that JCP supporters will stay home rather than support candidates on the non-communist left.

3. (C) After surveying Embassy and Japan constituent post contacts over several weeks, the consensus view is that the chance of the DPJ picking up large numbers of Diet seats in districts abandoned by the JCP is remote. Because the JCP opposes the U.S.-Japan alliance, the existence of the Self Defense Forces, and any amendment to the Constitution's war-renouncing Article Nine, the party is at odds with many if not a majority in the DPJ. The extent to which the DPJ will benefit from the JCP change in election strategy will be determined case-by-case, and will depend largely on local politics and personalities. This cable outlines the situation

and incorporates information from Japan constituent posts.
End Summary and Comment.

Party in Decline

¶4. (SBU) The Japan Communist Party is one of the largest non-ruling communist parties in the world, with about 400,000 members in 24,000 branches across Japan, but it is also a party in decline. As recently as the 1997 House of Representatives election, the JCP garnered 13 percent of the vote, or a record 7.23 million votes and 26 Diet seats. In the July 1998 Upper House election, the party continued to increase its number of votes and won a record 23 seats.

¶5. (SBU) Following the switch from multiple to single-member, winner-take-all Diet districts, JCP Diet numbers dropped dramatically. Currently, there are nine JCP Diet members in the Lower House and seven in the Upper House. The party received 4.4 million votes, or 7.5 percent of the total, in the 2007 Upper House election, and 4.92 million votes, or 7.3 percent, in the 2005 general election. The party also boasts the largest number of local assembly members declaring a party allegiance -- 3,130 -- but that number is down from its peak of 4,421 in September 1999. As of the end of 2005, there were about 50,000 local assembly members in Japan, of which about three-quarters are unaffiliated with any party.)

JCP Revises Election Strategy

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¶6. (SBU) The JCP has made a practice of fielding candidates in every constituency for Diet elections. At its annual convention in September 2007, however, the party announced it will no longer run candidates in electoral districts in which it received less than eight percent of the July 2007 Upper House election's proportional support rate. In the July 2007 election, the JCP earned more than eight percent of the proportional representation vote in 134 out of 300 electoral districts. Add to that the 20 or so districts in traditional JCP strongholds, such as the Kansai region and areas in Nagano and Kochi Prefectures, and the JCP should be able to run candidates in about 150 districts, leaving about another 150 districts without a JCP candidate.

¶7. (C) LDP Election Strategy Headquarters Director Akira Kume explained to Embassy Tokyo that the JCP is coping with an aging activist base and suffering financial difficulties due in part to the shrinking circulation of the party newspaper Akahata Shimbun. JCP watchers at the Kinki Public Security Intelligence Bureau (KPSIB) believe the change in election strategy stems from the party's financial crisis, which was exacerbated by a new Japanese election law stipulating that candidates must submit a JPY 3 million (approx. USD 29,000) deposit in order to run. Candidates forfeit their deposits to the government if they receive less than ten percent of the total votes cast.

¶8. (C) The JCP lost JPY 669 million (approx. USD 6.5 million) in forfeited deposits in the 2005 Lower House "Koizumi landslide" election, KPSIB told ConGen Osaka. The party appears to have calculated it cannot afford to lose this kind of money in future elections. However, the JCP is still willing to take some risk of losing deposits and has decided to run in districts where it got between eight and ten percent of the vote. If the JCP were to set the cutoff for competing at ten percent exactly, it reportedly fears it would be forced to cede areas where it has borderline, but in its view significant, popular support.

Who Benefits From JCP Drawback?

¶9. (SBU) Despite the JCP's relatively small size, the party's decision to cut its candidates by more than half could have an impact on the next election. In a best case scenario for the opposition, based on Lower House elections in 2003 and 2005, transferring JCP votes to DPJ candidates would have defeated 40 to 50 LDP Diet members whose margin of victory was less than the JCP votes in their districts. To cite a specific example, in the Kansai region the JCP plans to field candidates in only six of twelve Lower House electoral districts. According to KPSIB analysis of recent election data (protect), three Hyogo seats held by the LDP and "abandoned" by the JCP will probably go to the DPJ in the next LH election, provided the JCP supports the DPJ candidate. Thus, the DPJ would likely gain another three seats, leading to a huge loss for the ruling coalition in Hyogo.

¶10. (C) The benefit to the DPJ of the JCP's decision may be smaller than the DPJ hopes because some of the districts the JCP is planning to abandon are LDP and conservative strongholds with few JCP members, observed Shunsuke Oba, staff writer for Nikkei Shimbun. Oba argued that JCP and Komeito supporters have similar working class backgrounds, meaning that in Komeito districts where the JCP decides not to compete, the ruling coalition partner Komeito might get a boost in voter support, drawn from the lower income base the JCP targets.

¶11. (C) Alternatively, JCP voters may choose to support a candidate from a party other than the LDP, DPJ or Komeito.

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In Kyoto and Osaka, for example, JCP candidates won over eight percent of the vote in the last election. In the Osaka 10th District in particular, home to well-known Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) politician Kiyomi Tsujimoto, the JCP received over ten percent of the vote, thus qualifying for a candidate in the next election under the new rules. However, KPSIB speculated that the JCP will cut a deal with Tsujimoto and not field a JCP candidate in her district if the SDPJ agrees to help the Communists in one of its weaker races. This would allow the SDPJ to pick up another proportional seat in the Diet.

View from the North

¶12. (C) In Hokkaido, the DPJ already holds eight out of the 12 Lower House seats. Only one of the remaining four LDP seats could be tipped to the opposition by a JCP shift, according to ConGen Sapporo. The four seats are held by Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura, former LDP Policy Coordinator Shoichi Nakagawa, former LDP Secretary General Tsutomu Takebe and Gaku Ishizaki; among these, Ishizaki is

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the most likely loser. Nakagawa also might be defeated, according to the Consulate, but Machimura and Takebe have strong enough voter bases to be able to offset a move of JCP votes to their opponents.

¶13. (SBU) The JCP proportional support rate in the northern prefectures in the July Upper House election ranged from 6.3 to 6.5 percent, while in Hokkaido the rate was 7.3 percent. In northern Honshu, JCP votes are more likely to go to Social Democratic Party of Japan candidates than DPJ candidates, especially in Aomori and Akita prefectures, reports Sapporo. Ideologically, the SDPJ is closer to the JCP, and shares views on protecting the Constitution, opposing the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and banning nuclear weapons.

DPJ-JCP Cooperation Prospects

¶14. (C) The DPJ will not cooperate with the JCP in the next election, according to DPJ Election Strategy Committee General Manager Masato Akimoto. Nevertheless, he suggested that the DPJ would benefit and pick up votes after JCP's change because the Communists are unlikely to run candidates in rural districts where the DPJ has been strengthening its support base. Akimoto added that the DPJ plans to conclude election cooperation agreements with other opposition parties, such as the SDPJ and the People's New Party. He also noted that historically JCP voters have not shifted votes to Komeito.

¶15. (C) JCP supporters are more likely to vote for the opposition DPJ than the LDP in districts without a JCP candidate, said the LDP's Kume, although officially the JCP and the DPJ will not cooperate in the next election. Kume believes only a small number of JCP votes in these districts will go to the ruling coalition's junior member Komeito, despite the fact that both parties attract lower income voters. He also indicated he believes an alliance between the JCP and the DPJ is a possibility.

JCP-Komeito Similarities

¶16. (C) Osaka Consulate General's KIPSB contacts noted that the Komeito and the JCP are similar in two ways. First, they are both supported by low-income voters. Second, they both help the LDP in elections: Komeito helps its coalition partner by voting for LDP candidates, while the Communists support the LDP by splitting opposition votes with marginal

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candidates in the single-member districts.

Akahata Shimbun: the financial base of the party

¶17. (C) Sales of the JCP's newspaper, Akahata Shimbun, supports all day-to-day JCP activities in the Diet and local assemblies, election campaigns, and financial activities. The JCP refuses donations from corporations and organizations as well as government subsidies to political parties but accepts contributions from individuals. Readership of its daily and Sunday editions - boosted by aggressive sales pitches and quotas for all party members to sign up subscribers -- reached 3.5 million in 1980 but has declined to about 1.6 million at present. The party's long-time goal of increasing readership to four million appears unattainable.
SCHIEFFER